

Head Start Dissertation Grants

Dominique Levert

Project Title: Ensuring Young Children Have a Head Start: Transition Practices that Link Early Childhood Education Settings

Mentor: Dr. Patricia Manz

Project Funding Years: 2020-2022

University Affiliation: Lehigh University

Project Abstract:

Twenty percent of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are living in poverty (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2018). These data are concerning as this developmental period is characterized by rapid brain growth, yet poverty experienced before the age of 3 can undermine development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Poverty has contributed to gaps in development that are detectable as early as age 2 by deficits in wide range of developmental domains (Halle et al., 2009). To protect against poverty's negative effects, attention has been given to early childhood education to provide access to high-quality early learning experiences. Early Head Start (EHS) and Head Start (HS) facilitate early childhood development by providing intensive comprehensive educational services for low-income infants and toddlers and their families.

As policies increase funding streams, EHS and HS have seen increased enrollment in both the infant/toddler and preschool programs (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019), providing access to early care for low-income children. However, this is also accompanied by a time of change as children and families are moving from home- or care-based settings into a more structured educational context (Rous & Hallam, 2006). Considering this, transitions are becoming more common with early childhood, yet little understanding is provided on how to protect its success. Ensuring a smooth transition from an infant/toddler program into preschool is critical, as adjustment challenges can cause a negative experience, making children less likely to be responsive to later schooling (West et al., 2001). Easing this change is especially critical given the substantial evidence signifying the long-term effects of a high-quality early childhood education program (Friedman-Krauss, Barnett, & Nores, 2016). Recently, the National Early Childhood Transition Center (NECTC) investigated practices and strategies that enhance early childhood transitions and created a survey of Transition Practices for agencies.

Some evidence exists to demonstrate how the use of transition practices by teachers impacts children's outcomes (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008), but these investigations only consider the preschool to kindergarten transition, leaving a void to potential impacts on early developmental age groups. Additionally, there is insufficient empirical guidance about practices that ensure a seamless transition from EHS to HS.

In collaboration with the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), the goals of this research project are to expand the extant literature to evaluate young children's experience as they transition from an EHS to HS. The proposed study has three major aims that will be addressed through partnership with OCDEL and EHS/HS staff and families: 1) adapt the NECTC survey for EHS/HS 2) examine transition practices used by EHS and HS staff and the interrelationship with variables, 3) examine the additive benefits of use of transition practices by EHS, HS, and both programs on children's developmental outcomes in the preschool year.

Elly Miles

Project Title: Enhancing Head Start Outcomes via Improved Referral Decisions for Family Support Programs: Leveraging Administrative Data and Capturing Family and Practitioner Voice

Mentor: Dr. Sarah Watamura

Project Funding Years: 2020-2022

University Affiliation: University of Denver

Project Abstract:

Head Start, Early Head Start (HS/EHS) and other family-serving agencies are key entry points for vulnerable families to access family support programs (FSPs) designed to enhance family well-being, improve parent-child relationships, and boost parent engagement in high quality early interventions (Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2018). Although families experiencing elevated stress are referred to FSPs to promote strong outcomes, increased risk can result in lowered engagement and benefits. A variety of demographic and structural family characteristics (e.g. greater poverty, single-parent households) are known to predict decreased program engagement and outcomes (ACF, 2002; Lundahl et al., 2006; McConnell, et al., 2013; Reyno & McGrath, 2006). Currently, it is unclear whether these family characteristics uniformly diminish engagement and outcomes or if certain FSPs more effectively engage some subpopulations. Given the presence of multiple FSPs in many communities, it is also important to characterize how subpopulations are currently matched to available FSPs. However, the decision-making process HS/EHS and other providers follow when referring families is unknown.

This proposal seeks to examine these issues through two aims. In the first aim, “what works for whom” will be tested by comparing how a range of family characteristics predict engagement and outcomes for over 13,000 families across five family support programs (FSPs): Family Resource Center Family Development Services, Colorado Community Response, SafeCare, Promoting Safe and Stable Families, and one Head Start site with robust integrated family support services. This aim will investigate whether participant characteristics predict drop-out and family development outcomes differentially across FSPs. Family development outcomes will be examined using pre- and post-measures of self-sufficiency, mental health, debt management, child education, child care access, family functioning, social support, concrete support, nurturing and attachment, and child development knowledge. Findings may serve to optimize referral matching between participants and programs and identify areas where program adaptations are needed to more equitably engage diverse families.

In the second aim, the schema HS/EHS and other providers follow to match participants to available programs will be characterized. HS/EHS and other family-serving agencies are relevant contexts for family referral, and HS/EHS outcomes may be impacted by FSPs. Qualitative exploration of the referral decision-making process when a menu of FSPs is available may illuminate “best practices” for referring providers to follow and offer important context for findings from aim one. Furthermore, this aim will identify if and at which steps parents had explicit choice during the referral process. Parent choice of intervention has been found to boost engagement and outcomes (He, et al., 2018; Swift & Callahan, 2009), making it an important consideration for engagement of vulnerable families. Three HS/EHS partners have joined in this aim, seeking to strengthen family engagement. Survey findings from aim one and interview data from aim two will be triangulated. Together, these findings will inform recommendations to guide providers’ decision-making processes when selecting FSPs for referral and ultimately to bolster effective program outcomes.

Laura Jimenez Parra

Project Title: Family Child Care: Characteristics, Relationships and Parent, and Child Outcomes

Mentor: Dr. Brenda Jones Harden

Project Funding Years: 2020-2022

University Affiliation: University of Maryland

Project Abstract:

Family child care (FCC) arrangements are a widely used form of care for infants and toddlers, as well as for low-income and minority families in the United States. Unfortunately, research has revealed that the global quality of FCC tends to be significantly lower when compared to center-based care and Head Start. Increasing the quality of FCC has become a priority of many federal and state policy initiatives, including Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, which aim to improve the quality of care delivered to infants and toddlers from low-income backgrounds.

Despite extensive research on different aspects of center-based care and Head Start, much less is known about FCC settings. Additionally, only examining global quality in these child care arrangements may result in an inadequate representation of the specific elements of quality in family child care homes. Qualitative studies have found that families and children develop close relationships with their FCC providers often serving as sources of support that go beyond traditional caregiving. To our knowledge, no empirical research has examined these relationships and the effect these might have on the well-being of families and children enrolled in FCC.

The proposed research study will build upon an ongoing collaboration with a family child care network, to conduct a within-group examination of family child care programs used by a group of urban, low-income families. Specifically, this project aims to address and understand the nuanced characteristics of FCC homes by investigating the relationships between parents and providers and how these affect parent and child functioning. The study proposes to partner with the Maryland State Family Child Care Association (MSFCCA) which currently provides services and support to FCC providers in the state of Maryland. Working with MSFCCA staff, our goal is to recruit 30 FCC providers and 150 families as participants in this study.

Cross-sectional data will be collected at three levels (i.e., FCC providers, parents, and children) in two different settings: 1) FCC settings, and 2) families' homes. During the interview with the FCC providers, we will collect information about their attitudes, knowledge, and practices regarding the families in their program, as well as the characteristics of FCC homes, including the quality of the environment. During the home visit with families, we will collect information on a range of family and child characteristics, including parents' perspectives on the quality of the relationship with their FCC providers, parental depression and stress, and children's socioemotional outcomes.

Results of the study will contribute to our understanding of FCC settings, particularly by addressing the large research gap regarding the quality of the relationships FCC providers and parents develop and its relation to the well-being of families from low-income backgrounds. Findings will be disseminated to our MSFCCA partners and nationally to practitioners, policymakers, and other researchers through publication outlets. The knowledge gained from this study has the potential to inform the design and implementation of effective strategies to improve the quality of care of FCC settings, and the development of support services to families and children from high-risk, low-income backgrounds.

Elica Sharifnia

Project Title: Science in Head Start Classrooms: Examining the Relation between Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs, Classroom Practice, and Children's School Readiness

Mentor: Dr. Daryl B. Greenfield

Project Funding Years: 2020-2021

University Affiliation: University of Miami

Project Abstract:

Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are at risk for entering kindergarten unprepared compared to their higher-income peers. High-quality learning experiences in early childhood programs can act as a protective factor for children from low-income homes and ultimately support children's healthy development. Science has recently been identified as an ideal domain that can foster high-quality learning experiences for young children as it can support learning across multiple domains. Despite the importance of science in early childhood, children from Head Start programs enter kindergarten with lower scores on science compared to other developmental domains. This alarming gap in addition to the recognition of the value that science affords young children has led to the current national focus on better understanding how to support high-quality science teaching and learning in early childhood. Researchers and policymakers emphasize the need to examine the factors that influence children's science learning and therefore support reducing the school readiness gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards science are important factors to examine given the impact they have on teacher classroom practice and student achievement. Research has shown a positive relationship between teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards science teaching and their classroom practice in regards to the *frequency* and *quality* of their science instruction. Evidence also suggests that young children's experiences in high-quality instructional interactions, such as those within the context of science, can foster children's learning and development. Although the relations between attitudes and beliefs and the frequency and quality of science instruction has been established in elementary school, the current study aims to extend the research to the Head Start preschool setting.

Few studies have explored teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards science in relation to their classroom science practice within early childhood and no studies to date have examined the relation with children's school readiness skills. Therefore, further research in this area is necessary to better understand the factors, such as teachers' attitudes and beliefs, that can influence the frequency of high-quality science experiences within Head Start classrooms that can contribute to children's overall school readiness.

The purpose of this study is to understand 1) the relation between preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards science and the *frequency* of science instruction, 2) the relation between preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards science and *the quality* of science instruction, and 3) examine if teacher science practice, measured by both the *frequency* and *quality* of science instruction, mediates the relationship between preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards science and children's school readiness skills. The goal of this study is to inform teacher professional development and interventions focused on improving the quality of science education in early childhood and ultimately support children's school readiness.

Callie Silver

Project Title: Illinois Head Start/Early Head Start (HS/EHS) Programs Respond to COVID-19: A Qualitative Study of Directors and Parents

Mentor: Dr. Katherine Zinsser

Project Funding Years: 2020-2021

University Affiliation: University of Illinois

Project Abstract:

The loss of center-based, HS/EHS programming is just one way that COVID-19 is exacerbating existing systemic and structural disparities. Families in poverty, who are disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities, are not only more likely to suffer medically from this virus, but are also facing greater financial and educational losses as a result of the pandemic.

Since its inception, Head Start has emphasized family engagement and social-emotional learning as mechanisms to promote child well-being and success. As the COVID-19 pandemic interrupts classroom-based and in-person activities, resourceful programs continue to support children and families. This study seeks to capture this creativity and identify successful pathways by which programs maintained relationships with families and supported children's well-being during state shutdowns and the transition back to open centers. More than ever before, programs are experimenting with novel family engagement strategies that could transform "normal practice" over the long term.

The current study uses a triangulated, longitudinal qualitative design to capture the perspectives of both Illinois HS/EHS center directors and parents/caregivers at various time points. Using purposeful sampling techniques to represent various center demographic variables, this study will utilize two qualitative strategies: remote interviews (for center directors) and virtual Parent Café focus groups (for parents/caregivers). In collaboration with our partners at the Illinois Head Start Association, this study will address the following aims:

- 1) Understand how Illinois HS/EHS centers describe their efforts to engage families prior to, during, and after COVID-19-related center closures.
- 2) Understand how Illinois HS/EHS centers describe their efforts to support children's social and emotional development prior to, during, and after COVID-19-related center closures.
- 3) Determine how Illinois HS/EHS parents and caregivers describe their program's efforts to engage them and foster their children's social-emotional development during center shutdowns.

Findings from this study will inform future practice in times of Head Start center closures, whether it be as a result of a pandemic or any other reason. Through a collaborative, strengths-based approach, this study will directly inform practice and policy of Head Start programs in Illinois and nationwide, while guiding the rest of the early childhood care and education field, which for decades has looked to Head Start as an exemplar.

Craig Van Pay

Project Title: Outcomes Related to Disparities in the Preschool Language Experiences of English Monolinguals and Dual Language Learners in Head Start

Mentor: Dr. Ji Young Choi

Project Funding Years: 2020-2021

University Affiliation: Iowa State University of Science and Technology

Project Abstract:

Early childhood education (ECE) programs are an important learning context for young children's positive development. Unfortunately, there are significant variations in the quality of ECE environments for learning overall, with differences in teacher responsiveness and interactivity, language use, and disparities in access to resources and opportunities (e.g., Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008). In a pilot study, we found that that experiential differences in preschool language exposure is partially explained by children's dual language learning status (Van Pay & Choi, 2020). In the study, English monolingual (EM) teachers talked less to Dual Language Learners (DLLs), children who are from homes where a language other than English is spoken, relative to EM children. Early language experiences and acquisition of English skills are crucial for every child, but particularly so for DLLs in their success in U.S. schools, where English is the primary language of instruction and interaction.

Research has shown that DLLs may arrive at kindergarten with poorer academic skills than their EM counterparts (e.g., Rathbun et al., 2004). For many years this was thought to be because learning two or more languages was detrimental to a child's development, a strong deficit-based view (see Hakuta, 1986). However, recent evidence shows that DLLs have better academic outcomes if they have high English proficiency (Choi et al., 2018; Halle et al., 2012), indicating the importance of early English acquisition for DLLs. Existing literature suggests that teacher language practices are critical for children's language outcomes (Dickinson, 2011). Achievement gaps between EMs and DLLs may be associated with meaningful differences in the language environments they receive in ECE.

Head Start, a comprehensive early education and support program for families and children of low income, is an important context for DLL education. In 2017-2018, nearly 30% of Head Start children were DLLs (National Head Start Association, n.d.). Many consider Head Start to be a model program for other ECE programs and it has been found to be effective for DLLs' learning (Puma et al., 2010). Given these facts, examining language experiences that predict language outcomes for DLLs in Head Start warrants further investigation. Additionally, the proportion of time spent in different types of classroom activities (i.e., free play, large group, small group) are associated with Head Start students' receptive vocabulary (Lippard et al., 2019). Different classroom activities are likely to provide different opportunities to scaffold children's language learning (Cabell, DeCoster, LoCasale-Crouch, Hamre, & Pianta, 2013), and this is also true for DLLs.

To that end, I propose three research questions to understand the language environment of DLLs as compared to EM peers, both across and within different types of classroom activities, and how the language experience is related to EM and DLLs' academic achievement over a Head Start year. This study will investigate 100 linguistically diverse children in 20 Head Start classrooms. Comprehensive, child-level data of a typical preschool language experiences will be captured by innovative technology. Study findings will offer foundational information for designing professional development for teachers in Head Start and beyond who are working with linguistically diverse DLLs.